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ABSTRACT

Traditional course outlines in a hybrid communication course cover the "elements" areas before discussion of different forms and types of relationships. This paper proposes a structure whereby the development of relationships is presented first, and the elements are examined as communication factors that promote or discourage a particular relationship. M. Knapp's (1978) stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart are presented in the paper as an efficient tool for this structure, with slight modification to accommodate the emphasis on friendship relationships as opposed to primary relationships. The organization proposed in the paper permits students to conduct an introspective analysis of their own interpersonal communication relationships, and the teaching involved takes on an enhanced interpersonal focus. (One table of data is included; 17 references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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ENHANCING THE INSTRUCTION OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE

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ENHANCING THE INSTRUCTION OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE

Abstract

Traditional course outlines in a hybrid communication course cover the "elements" areas before discussion of different forms and types of relationships. This paper proposes a structure whereby the development of relationships is presented first, and the elements are examined as communication factors that promote or discourage a particular relationship. Knapp's (1978) stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart are presented as an efficient tool for this structure, with slight modification to accommodate the emphasis on friendship relationships as opposed to primary relationships.

ENHANCING THE INSTRUCTION OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE

Life can be viewed as a string of relationships that intertwine, tangle, untangle, stretch and sometimes break. Few would deny the impact of relationships on our life's processes; yet, in most basic college communication courses, the concept is segregated from coverage of the elements of communication. The purpose of this paper is to advance the use of relationships as an alternative structure for the interpersonal section of a basic communication course. Various basic course texts will be incorporated into this analysis to assess the relative importance assigned to the content areas regarding relationships and friendships. Finally, this paper will present a proposition regarding a development of instruction following progression through relationship development that will categorize our interpersonal daily contacts, following a revision of the stage approach advanced by Knapp (1978). This program of instruction teaches first the areas of interpersonal relationship development, following the introduction of basic concepts. The "elements" sections of perception, listening, verbal and nonverbal communication are then presented, with references and direct application to the student's own interpersonal relationships.

The importance of one's interpersonal communication relationships cannot be denied. Duck (1985) writes, "Our greatest moments of joy and sorrow are founded in relationships" (p. 655). Rawlins (1992) who has devoted much of his professional career to the study of friendships, states, "The frustrations and delights of friendship emerge during childhood and continue throughout life" (p. 5). Deborah Tannen (1990) emphasizes this importance when she writes, "Each person's life is lived as a series of conversations" (p. 13).

Impact is not to be denied. Adler and Rodman (1988) assert that "Life without friends would be empty." (p. 211). One's life may be structured around these relationships. "An individual's friendships can have a profound impact--both facilitative and disruptive--on other aspects of the individual's life" (Hays, 1988, p. 406).

The first step is to examine the usage of the terms *friendship* and *relationship*. Many writers use the terms synonymously, while for others *relationship* refers to the person(s) with whom one establishes a long term, physical exchange. "The term 'friend' is used very loosely and idiosyncratically, by both the general public and social scientists, to describe a diverse range of relationships" (Hays, 1988, p. 391). In this article in the Handbook of Personal Relationships Hays attempts to discern communalities in a multitude of definitions of friendships. The search culminates in his definition of friendship as "voluntary interdependence

between two persons over time, that is intended to facilitate social-emotional goals of the participants, and may involve varying types and degrees of companionship, intimacy, affection and mutual assistance" (p. 395). Littlejohn (1978) characterized a relationship as a "pattern of interaction" again emphasizing the developing nature. The recurring theme of patterns and developmental aspects is reiterated by Pearson and Nelson (1990), "Interpersonal relationships may be defined as associations between two or more people who are interdependent, who use some consistent patterns of interaction, and who have interacted for some period of time" (p. 182).

Rawlins' (1992) five characteristics of friendship are that they are: essentially voluntary, a personal relationship, a spirit of equality, a mutual involvement, and an implication of affective ties (pp. 11-12). Based upon interviews with participants, Rubin (1985) found the following commonalities in the description of friends: trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty, mutuality, constancy, understanding and acceptance. Others have indicated the lack of definite role structure as a component of a friendship (Gouran, Miller and Wiethoff, 1992; Leefeldt and Callenback, 1979; Allen, 1979).

As Henrick (1988) points out, "A relationship is not a material entity and is therefore in some sense abstract" (p.432). The components of these definitions, although indeed abstract, are common themes through most definitions of both friendships

and relationships. For the purposes of this paper and the proposed course structure, the two terms may be used interchangeably. The following quote from an introductory communication course student, delivered before any discussion of friendships and relationships summarizes the importance placed upon them:

> "Your relationships...you can think of them as a couple of big circles...you have a group around you like a number of close people, 2 or 3 for most people, just a very small number, then you go outside, people who are friends but you're not going to tell them everything...based on where they fall in those rings is how you decide how plausible their ideas are, if you're going to trust them."

Many students in a basic communication hybrid course would like to focus primarily on the public speaking aspect, since that is the arena they fear the most. Many of the examples and illustrations offered during the "elements" section of basic hybrid courses, particularly listening, focus on public speaking, even though the course may be divided into different categorical sections: interpersonal, small group, and public speaking. The typical course structure follows the outlines that are common through many of the basic course texts: introductory concepts, elements (perception, self-concept, listening, verbal and non-verbal), then interpersonal relationships. Due to this lack of direct application to a student's life, many students may not

feel completely involved during the "elements" section of the course.

Yet, in the course of an average person's life, where does one's communication focus? Several basic course texts answer this question. Yoder, Hugenberg and Wallace (1993, p. 200) state: "Interpersonal communication is probably the most frequent context of communication. It involves our one-to-one communication situations at home, at school, on the phone or at work." Additionally, Gouran, Miller and Wiethoff, 1992, p. 172) contend that "Through our relationships we define the entire range of human emotions. When asked where their greatest joys come from, people usually indicate that their most rewarding experiences come from relationships with others." Thus, the large majority of an individual's communication existence focuses upon the interpersonal aspects, the relationships that one develops with others in order to fulfill and satisfy needs.

A short survey was conducted to determine how extensive a relationship network exists among college students. 145 students (mean age = 21.91) in several sections of a basic communication hybrid course were asked "How many friends do you presently have? A friend may be described as someone with whom we have a commitment (family may be included here), someone who satisfies our needs and we satisfy theirs." The survey was distributed on the second day of the semester to control for contamination of material covered and for contamination based on interpretation by various instructors. Responses from 143

students resulted in a mean of 9.86 friends per student [9.52 for males (n = 56); 10.08 for females (n = 87)].

Additionally, the students were asked to indicate the possibilities that exist for interpersonal contact with others on an average daily basis. They were asked to estimate the number for the following divisions:

a) with how many people do you have an opportunity to acknowledge or communicate?

b) with how many people do you say basically "hello, how are you" and nothing else?

c) with how many people do you talk for more than 5 minutes?

d) with how many people do you talk for more than 10 minutes

e) with how many people do you talk for more than 30 minutes?

TABLE I

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
Contact	52.04	59.01	2	300
Hello	27.28	34.74	2	270
Five minutes	12.36	10.77	0	70
Ten minutes	8.04	7.45	0	50
Thirty Minutes	5.31	4.88	0	25

These results indicate the amount and frequency of interpersonal contact an average student may encounter on an average day. They also demonstrate the gradual "weeding out" or reduction of temporal intensity that one would expect to occur. Although studies have indicated a differences in the depth of relationships between gender, it is important to note the lack of

gender difference in response to the number of friends. Therefore, even if there exist differences in the level of intimacy reached within a relationship (as defined by risk of self-disclosure), the mere presence of the friendship allows for a common ground for discussion.

Based on these results, the proposed alternative basic course outline in order focuses the entire first section on interpersonal communication relationships--and reduces the teaching of public speaking and small group communication concepts during the "elements" section of the course.

Mark Knapp's (1978) stages of development, and Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory are essential elements for teaching in this manner. However, in order to apply the stages fully to the idea of friendship as opposed to physically intimate relationships, a revised schemata is offered that more fully accommodates this conception of interpersonal relationships, or friendships, as the rudiment of everyday communication. The Knapp schemata seems to pertain more succinctly to the "primary relationship", than to the numerous friendship relationships one encounters during the course of a lifetime. The set of standards that one may use to apply to a primary relationship would likely not relate to a friendship, and vice-versa. Consequently, the following explanation involves a modification of the Stages of Coming Together and Coming Apart which allows for a more suitable application to friendships.

Knapp's first step, initiating, focuses on the vast majority

of individuals with whom one comes in contact on a daily basis. For the sample mentioned previously, the average number of contact possibilities was 52. This is definitely a high estimate compared to an informal posing of this question. Away from the college, or educational, environment, this number greatly diminishes. By the time the students differentiated between possible contact and acknowledgment, the number had been halved (27 others were acknowledged by "hello" on a daily basis).

Once the initiating stage has been traversed, a relationship enters the second stage, experimenting, a time of expanded, but still limited, contact. The survey results again indicate this temporal progression. The students averaged 12 people with contact of five minutes a day, but only 8 people were in contact for an average of 10 minutes a day. In his popular book on interpersonal communication, Marsh (1988) describes this phase: "Following initial contact, further encounters may confirm an attractive first impression. Then attraction may grow. Progressive stages of increasing openness can peel off layers of our outer selves like the skins of an onion. Communication becomes more intense when this happens, with a sharing of private thoughts and opinions" (p. 169). The frequently used delineation between friends and acquaintances correlates here. A large number of individuals with whom one comes in contact with never progress towards that level of affiliation defined as friendship.

Finally, the average number of contacts with other people for over thirty minutes a day was 5.3. In juxtaposition, however,

the average number of friends perceived by the same sample was 9.86. Thus, friends may be defined in many different ways by the students in our basic courses. Prolonged daily contact may not be a necessary requirement for maintenance.

Knapp (1978) comments: "Certainly self-disclosure contributes to the growth of a relationship which develops naturally and nonmanipulatively...less intimate information will be exchanged in the experimenting stage. As people begin forays into the intensifying stage, we will see a flurry of more personal self-disclosures. These disclosures, then, will increase as the relationships moves into the integrating stage" (p. 154). At this point, a revision of the third stage, intensification, is required to allow for a fuller discussion of interpersonal communication, or friendships, as relationship development. This revision was a response primarily to students' lack of familiarity or prior experience with Knapp's final two stages (integration or bonding) or actual ridicule of the stages if applied to friendships.

The added stages of intensification are based on the concepts of self-disclosure and need sustenance, with reference to the Social Penetration Theory. Once a person enters the intensifying stage of a relationship certain decisions must be made. First, a decision is made based on one's needs situation at the present time. For the most part, relationships can focus on the three primary need levels: control, inclusion, and affection. If at any point, a person feels that a need is being

fulfilled by others through an established relationship, a decision not to advance a new relationship at this time may be made. Hays (1988) explains:

> Relationship development is seen as proceeding in an orderly sequence from superficial interaction in narrow areas to increasingly intimate interaction in broader areas. Progression along the breadth and depth dimensions is governed by a process of dyadic exploration, evaluation and forecasting; an individual samples the rewards and costs of interacting with a potential friend and then decides whether to increase or decrease the level of involvement based on perceptions of the probable rewardingness of future interactions (p. 398).

Once the decision to advance the relationship is made, the level of self-disclosure is an indicator of the progression through the intensifying stage. The three phases of this stage are labeled based on increases in the risk level of the self-disclosure, risk defined as the possibility of rejection by the other, which could result in termination or alteration of the relationship. Once again, there is a progression through these phases, just like there tends to be a steady passage through Knapp's other stages. The three phases are:

A. None to low risk self-disclosure

B. Medium risk self-disclosure

C. High risk self-disclosure

Following presentation of these phases, students can now

apply where Knapp's development stages pertain to most of their interpersonal relationships. They are able to discuss why some progress through to the intensification C phase, and why some never go beyond the experimenting stage. The final two stages of coming together, integration and bonding, are therefore discussed as stages that may occur, but are not necessary, for an "intimate" friendship relationship.

Additionally, movement occurs forward and in reverse, depending on the needs and other situational factors, such as proximity, involved in the relationship progression. Within this context, the stages of Coming Apart are discussed as they relate to the level of intensification reached. Final termination of the relationship is not a necessary stage of coming apart; thus, the differentiating, circumscribing and stagnating stages are primarily presented as the dissolution steps within friendship relationships. Termination may occur, but with a lower probability. Leefeldt and Callenback (1979) describe this phenomena, "Some friendships thrive in a context of shared interests; others have outlined them and seem to survive because the past itself has become a shared interest" (pp. 2-3). Many people can describe a friend with whom they are not in regular contact; but once the separation is ended, the communication level resumes at the same level of intensification as before. Yet, the same student would be able to relate to a separation that was followed by nary a thought about the other. The bi-polar experiences may many times be explained through the use of

the levels of intensification.

For many college students this conceptualization of friendship formation and dissolution has particular potency. Many are entering a new life phase and leaving behind friends they thought would last a lifetime. Early in the college experience, they find that their communication time with some friends has diminished, that the differences in interests and shared experiences are expanding causing a decrease in the intimacy level of self disclosure. The bonds of the past, however, are powerful, and many are unwilling to let the friendship end. They cling, however tenuously, to the threads of the friendship. At this point, a discussion of the first three stages of coming apart results in enlightenment for many students. The dissolution is not permanent, a relationship may undergo changes, particularly within the intensification levels.

Level A intensification terminations will result in more confusion than if termination occurs with someone in the experimenting stage; however, as the risk of self-disclosure increases, so do the possible consequences of dissolution. Within the B and C stages of intensification, an individual becomes more hesitant to completely break the bond--termination. A journey backwards may ensue, with a reduction in the intensity of self disclosure, but not a complete absence. This reduction closely resembles the communication tendered during the differentiating, circumscribing and stagnation stages. A relationship may proceed in this manner for an indefinite period

of time. Once again the needs of one individual and the satisfaction of these needs by the other may be of primary importance, along with the obligation a person may feel towards the other because of past affiliation. The Leefeldt and Callenback quote cited previously emphasizes this bond established through previous attachments.

This proposed organization permits the students to conduct an introspective analysis of their own interpersonal communication relationships. Simultaneously, the teaching involved in the consequent areas of communication, such as listening, takes on an enhanced interpersonal focus. Direct application seems to be less difficult, both for the student and instructor. Students of any age group, both traditional and non-traditional are able to relate to many of the issues discussed in this paper. If indeed "life can be viewed as a series of conversations," this approach facilitates instruction from this perspective.

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